

## What does Syriza's Victory Mean for EU-Russia Relations?

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The Greek legislative elections of 25<sup>th</sup> January yielded a left-wing government, with Syriza and its leader Alexis Tsipras emerging victorious. As well as raising the worries of a possible “Grexit” from the Eurozone and further implications for the European economy once again, this has also had an effect on EU foreign affairs, more specifically, the relationship with Russia.

Before the Greek elections, the government of Hungary – especially in the form of Prime Minister Viktor Orban - was the [main pro-Russian voice within the EU](#). Now, there seems to be a new addition to the pro-Russian sentiment within the European Union that is likely to attempt to steer the EU away from further sanctions on Russia.

On 27<sup>th</sup> January, Greece's new government [raised a formal objection](#) to an EU statement that condemned Russian alleged involvement in the Ukraine and a called for wider restrictive measures (sanctions). While it is interesting that an anti-austerity government should so quickly turn its attention to foreign affairs instead of focusing on austerity - [Syriza's main election platform](#) – it is perhaps not all that surprising. After all, Syriza had some previous indications of being favourable to Russia. For instance, Tsipras [visited Moscow in May 2014](#), where he voiced his support for the separatist movements in Ukraine, using similar language as the Russian government, and discussed energy relations with Russia. It is also claimed by the Washington Post that within the first hours of his leadership, Tsipras' [first foreign visitor was the Russian ambassador](#), followed by the Chinese ambassador. Syriza's MEPs (Greek MEPs listen under the Confederal Group of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left – GUE/NGL) also voted against the [EU-Ukraine association agreement](#), and mostly abstained from voting on the [EU-Moldova](#) and [EU-Georgia](#) association agreements (though this could be attributed to party cohesion, as the entire Confederal Group of the European United Left voted similarly).

It is thus unknown how far the Greek government will go in fostering their relationship with Russia. For the time being, Tsipras has [ruled out the option of Russian financial aid](#) and decided to negotiate with Greece's creditors instead.

However, the appearance of potentially pro-Russian governments in the West can potentially have greater implications for the policies and the security of the European Union. On 9<sup>th</sup> January, *The Washington Post* raised the issue of a '[Russian beachhead](#)' in Europe. The piece argued that Greece could potentially block any further sanctions against Russia, limiting their effectiveness, since both the EU and NATO follow the principle of unanimity. It also discussed a potential security dilemma for NATO, in the form of Ian Kearns, director of the European Leadership Network. He was quoted saying that "If you can't sit down in a NATO meeting in Brussels, dive into the intelligence and be sure that it's not going straight back to the Kremlin, that's a pretty significant and shocking development for the alliance".

This also may lead to increasing tension within the EU as the governments that are more critical of Russia, such as Poland and the Baltic States, are unlikely to change their tone and will continue to voice their [support for Ukraine](#), at least partly due to their experience during the Cold War. Furthermore, with former Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk now functioning as President of the European Council, the agenda is likely to retain its critical tone. An argument between an EU institution and the government of a member state could also be used for similar anti-EU rhetoric. The Russian media is likely to emphasize any future conflicts on these grounds, claiming that Europe is not united and weak.

These issues could potentially become more acute if like-minded governments come to power in other countries. Spain's anti-austerity party, Podemos, appears to have been [inspired by Syriza's victory](#) and is hoping for a change in government in Madrid,. However, it is yet to be seen whether they would be inclined to follow Greece's and Hungary's examples in foreign affairs, meaning that Russian newspaper *Pravda's* branding of [Podemos as a pro-Russian party](#) may be somewhat premature. An additional point to consider is that Russia can be seen as lobbying for

support within the European Union through populist parties, such as France's Front National, which received a €9 billion loan. Of course, a loan may be just that, but that leaves a prospect of potential Russian influence in EU institutions, such as the European Parliament.

While it is difficult to predict what may happen in the future, it is important to observe the actions of these populist and anti-austerity parties, as they may play an important role in EU-Russia relations. This does not mean that the EU should use draconian measures like branding these parties as 'foreign agents' (like Russia did with its NGO's with Western links), but since these opportunities for outside influence exist, it is important to be aware of such possibilities.